

Crystals of ice formed on her eyelashes. Layla looked to the heavens. The appearance of the sky was chopped into small triangular segments by the bare branches of the trees. The clear sky allowed bright stars to shine down undisturbed. She sighed and watched her breath form crystals of ice in the air. It had been a long night. Why had she waited so long to find another companion? A muffled sound disturbed her consideration of the night sky.

They didn't last long. Over the last year she had collected numerous companions and each had lasted less than the last. Maybe her expectations were too high.

Her long white hair, almost transparent against the frosty bark caressed her neck. Layla rested her head back on the tree and pressed her scalp into the frozen bark.

A twig snapped and she woke from her reverie; people were walking through her woods. She listened to their brash voices and their dull heart beats. She peered cautiously around the tree; her long pale fingers pushing into the icy bark as if pulling back a curtain.

Two men and a woman. She knew from their heart beats that they were young men. Layla unconsciously licked her lips. The woman giggled and tripped over the waves of hardened mud, landing comfortably in his arms. He expertly passed her onto the other male. Layla smiled. The bearded creature wasn't interested in the woman.

Layla became pensive; had she ever had a lover with a beard? Faces filed her memory. Not for decades. 1827, she remembered flowers, it was Spring. A smile curled her lips.

Her blue eyes narrowed as she focused on him. This man was tall with long limbs clad in a thick outdoor coat. She relaxed and let her mind expand outwards skimming the crisp frozen blades of grass and into his body. This was a healthy specimen. Inside his body she could feel the dull thud of his legs, the harsh rasp of his lungs and the jar of his joints as his skeleton shuddered. Layla let her smile develop into something more sinister.

This man's heart was strong and his body lithe and impressive. As a runner he had stamina, he may last longer, maybe five or six months. The last time that had happened it was the 2nd of January 1924. Yet another New Year lay before her and William. She sighed happily. Her beautiful blonde William had been there for almost half of it. Her eyes filled with moisture that crystallised into ice flakes at his name. "My Sweet William" she whispered. They had shared their lovers banter curled around each other on a bed of moss, they had watched the trees grow at the year progressed and as the trees reached their zenith he had started to lose his strength. William had been pale and weak and beautiful, but he stayed with her by force of his personality until the end.

The group were ahead of her now, she pressed her back into the tree and became one with it. It whispered softly. They had passed her without noticing. In the winter her body became pale almost silver and it glimmered with ice crystals, she merged into the tree and disappeared.

The couple whispered and the woman giggled again encouragingly. "Listen Jack, Lil and I need a little time together, share some body warmth. Keep an eye out for pervs will you." He winked at Jack and the couple staggered towards a group of evergreen bushes.

Jack groaned this was not how he wanted to spend his evening. He wished he had his gloves

and shoved his hands deep into his down jacket. He shuffled his feet trying to keep warm. Why couldn't they wait until they got back to the flat. He listened to their muffled sounds and shivered. "Look I'm not waiting, I'm freezing. There's no voyeur stupid to be out here in this weather other than me. I'm going, I'll meet you back home ok?"

Jack waited and listened to her giggles. He stomped his feet aggressively. He couldn't understand why the temperature in the woods seemed colder than outside. It was ridiculous, all the data he had seen showed how trees kept the temperature higher, it made it warmer to live inside forested areas. Jack rubbed his dry fingers onto his temple, then returned his hands to his pockets and strode on. "Look I'm really going, there's no way even you can get it up in this temperature, we'll be here all night. Did you hear Ken? I'm really leaving now." Jack swore under his steamy breath aggravated by the lack of response.

Jack strode almost at a jog as he continued along the central path through the woods leading straight onto the back of the municipal park he suddenly heard something. He turned his head automatically to the right, his brain searching for the soft gentle sounds. Whispering. Someone was out in this debilitating cold, whispering in the trees. It was like leaves rustling but there were no leaves, then he thought he had heard words. He sniggered at his own stupidity. The brain would always try to make sense of its surroundings; rustles would be translated as words, random shapes as images and abstractions as meaningful patterns.

Jack shuddered. Why had he stopped moving? He coughed weakly as he glanced around. His black boots were covered in glittering webs of frost. He tugged at his feet and the ice surrounding them cracked and released him.

He felt unnerved by his actions; he knew that extreme cold could have detrimental effects on your body. Hypothermia will make your brain sluggish, you will begin to make ridiculous decisions, like removing your clothes and that will endanger your body even more. He pulled his coat closer, he was aware of the problems therefore he must be ok. He had insulated boots, a thermal, a fleece and a down jacket. He turned to the woods. Ken had a shirt and coat, and that dippy girlfriend of his had jeans and a denim jacket. He wondered if they'd be alright. He pulled out his phone and looked at the time, half an hour had passed since they started this short cut. Jack watched bewildered as the cold pattern of white ice crystals spread across his phone. That was when his boot hit the thick transparent ice and he instinctively reached out to stop his fall.

Layla supported his arm. He stared down at her and couldn't speak. The shock of her appearing from nowhere and the almost physical pain of the cold emanating from her hand was affecting his brain. Jack fought the fog swirling in his head. He pulled at his arm trying to release it. "You're a strong one she whispered to herself. Calm yourself, relax."

"What the? Let go of me." Jack snapped angrily. His heart rate rose as the adrenalin coursed through his veins. He leant away from her and pulled. She refused to release her fingers and that's when he started to run, pulling her along on the ice. He looked down the path and it seemed to elongate but he focused, if he could just get out of the forest and into the park.

Layla was startled by the sensation of being pulled along the ice. She had seen humans doing this and they had fallen and laughed. This skating seemed fun. With that thought she released him. It

surprised her as much as him. Why would she release her prey? She wanted this strong, wild man but something had confused her. The sensation of skating had confused her. Licking her lips she pondered, what made this man so different? Nothing! He was simply someone to engage with through the never ending hours that lay before her. Just a toy.

Layla stared at her flat pumps and pushed forward on the ice. This elegant sensation, like flying on the ground was interesting. How would she describe it to them? She reached out to the trees and tried to explain 'fun'. Skating was fun.

The ground came to meet her and she felt the ice slam into her back. She gazed up through the branches at the star, so beautiful, so hypnotic.

Jack could see her lying on the ice. She seemed so still. His legs kept moving but his head refused to turn from her prostate body.

Shock; it had just been the shock of someone being so close and not hearing them move towards him. And the cold, she had bear arms and her hands had been so unbearably cold. He felt his head clear slightly as he stumbled out of the forest.

Jack tentatively moved down the path, just a few yards ahead he would be able to see if she was still lying down. He crept back along the path. Her body lay still. "Christ!" he exclaimed moving back towards where she lay. As he strode forward he made a mental note that being close to trees was colder. When he got back to Uni he would have to do some research into that, it shouldn't be right.

Jack stared down at her body. Her almost transparent dress revealed her naked body. He fearfully knelt by her side. He could feel the heat from his knee melting the ice as he slowly reached over to touch her face.

Layla was floating in the sky. She had always wished she had the capacity to free herself from the ground, from the soil and the plant life that held her here. Layla had always wanted to be a sky nymph. She imagined her sisters floating high above the soil and earth in the darkness. The stars sang such beautiful songs. That had always been her deepest desire.

As Jack's fingers touched her face she turned suddenly in surprise as he leapt backwards landing on his bottom. Her shocked expression made him laugh, she copied him. He turned his head, as the sound seemed to come not only from her mouth but from the trees all around. "I thought you were dead. I really did. It must be minus two or three and you're just lying on ice. Aren't you cold? Have you been drinking? Is that it? If you get hypothermia you lose the capacity to protect yourself, come on let me help you up."

Jack felt confused. Why wasn't she answering? She wasn't mute, she had spoken hadn't she? He definitely heard her laugh, like the delicate sound of ice crystals blowing in the breeze.

There were several things that disturbed him about her, even beyond her refusal to speak. The important one was she didn't look real. There was something so unnerving about the way she watched him, as if analysing the way he moved, turned his head, spoke. It was her lack of emotion. He had worked with some seriously geeky Maths professors in the labs and they were definitely

lacking in social skills but they didn't quite behave like her. Suddenly blood started to freeze in his veins. He watched her pale grey eyes scanning his and swallowed down his fear. She didn't blink. It seemed such a small, inconsequential thing but it was important. You needed to blink, it was something to do with moisture protection wasn't it? He shivered when he considered what would happen when she slept. He envisioned her lying on a bed of ice in that shroud like dress staring unblinking up at the sky and he shuddered.

He struggled to standing, conscious of her looking up at him. She had such small fragile limbs and the features on her face were so delicate. He held out his hand and she looked at his open palm for a second unsure what he wanted her to give him. "Let me help you." He repeated and she slipped her hand into his and unfolded herself.

Jack knew that something had been weird about the way she stood up. It was as if she had simply reversed falling down and that had made the hairs on his chest and arms stand. "Why don't you blink and why aren't you wearing warm clothes?"

Layla frowned. The human asked too many questions, he was irritating. She turned to walk away releasing his hand. "No wait. I just want to skate some more. I promise not to ask any more questions. Layla turned back to face him and held out her arms. Jack watched the way she let them hang without purpose as if unsure what to do. He stepped forward and gathered her in his arms. His hands ached where he touched her cold body but his coat insulated him from her body. They slid elegantly across the ice and he felt his mouth smile. The warmth of his hands flooded her mind and despite trying desperately not to she felt her body sucking out his warmth.

He skated to the edge of the ice and stepped onto the hard mud. "Sorry, you're making me so cold." Jack opened and closed his sore and chapped hands, then he started to swing his arms widely vigorously slapping his body.

Layla placed her hands on her stomach. She felt suddenly empty. "Are you hurt?" He asked. Layla analysed his body as her eyes moved up to his face. This strange feeling was sadness. He would leave her now. She considered his face, she could force him to stay but she liked that he came back of his own volition. Layla had never experienced the sensation of being chosen before. She was the one who chose and they stayed no matter what they wanted.

"Look I don't live far, come back with me and I'll give you something warm to wear and some food." Layla shuddered at the thought of being around humanity. They didn't understand her or her people.

She watched him unzip his coat and slip it over his fleece; he rested the soft down jacket on her shoulders. Her eyes wandered over his kind expression. "I promise not to come on to you if that's what you're worried about." He was beginning to stammer. The cold was seeping through the fleece.

The coat had the deep scent of him. She slipped her arms inside the sleeves and hugged her arms across her body. It felt soft and comfortable. Layla unwound her arms and let the coat slip off. "Thank you." She whispered as she headed back to the trees. Every move she made was languid and slow. Her arms moved in time with her legs and as they moved forward it was as if she was reaching

out trying to catch something just out of her reach.

Who was this woman? He wanted to understand how she could survive such cold temperatures without the normal human reactions. There had been no teeth chattering or shivering. Was this hypothermia? Convincing himself that these were signs of her brain acting irrationally, she didn't understand the danger she was in.

Jack hugged his coat pretending it still held her body and then slipped it back on zipping up the front. Then he pulled the toggle tight on his wrists. He held his hood in his fingers and pulled it over his head and secured the toggle around his neck; then he proceeded to follow her.